

CAN TOYS JUST BE, WELL, TOYS?

Camilla Rankin takes a closer look at what makes toys educational

WALKING INTO A toyshop can be a truly scary experience, especially for a new parent.

The onslaught of bright colours, noises, flashing lights, buttons to press and levers to pull can be a real shock to the system (as can your toddler's sensory-overload-induced tantrum!).

It is no wonder that toy makers are looking for more ways to make their wares stand out from all the others crowding the shelves. But it's not the brightest, most branded or loudest toys that are the big sellers, it is those toys that claim to be "educational" that fly to the tills.

What exactly makes a toy educational? Do they really make a difference? And should we really care – and fork out the extra money for them?

WHAT MAKES A TOY 'EDUCATIONAL'?

While there is no clear answer to this question, there are two differing schools of thought.

The first says that educational toys are specifically designed to enhance particular areas of your child's development and it is to your child's advantage to play with them.

The second claims there is no such thing as an "educational toy". It is just a marketing ploy – as all toys have some inherent educational value and will teach your child something (good or bad). This school of thought holds that it is not the toy itself that is educational but simply playing, creating and using imagination that is. Interacting with an adult or caregiver is also considered essential, as are the values taught while playing with a particular toy.

“Two sticks and a pot could become a drum for one child, a wizard's cauldron for another, while another may struggle to engage with these tools creatively”

Many educators and education professionals say that for a toy to be labelled educational, it needs to play a specific developmental role and encourage the learning and perfecting of a particular set of essential skills.

They must fall into at least one developmental category, such as cognitive (counting toys, books); visual-perceptual (puzzles, copying shapes, tangrams); fine motor (drawing, cutting, painting, threading, play dough); gross motor (balls, swings, hula hoops); sensory (jungle gyms, slimes, sand pits) or imaginative (dressing up).

"All the toys we buy for our classrooms have an underlying educational purpose," explains Janet Buck, a Grade 0 and literacy teacher in Johannesburg. "They need to provide children with the opportunity to grow in specific developmental areas.

"It takes a trained and skilled teacher to buy the correct toys and also to set

up play areas that provide excellent learning experiences."

Joburg-based Louise Stofberg, an occupational therapist with a special interest in paediatrics, agrees.

"While most toys are educational, those that encourage children to use their imagination, stimulate creativity, problem-solve, develop motor skills, social skills and/or visual perceptual skills, and allow children to explore and use them in a variety of different ways are the most valuable," she says.

"Play is the work of children, but toys also need to be fun and age-appropriate, otherwise they will not sustain the child's attention and will by that very nature not be educational."

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE TOY – IT'S ABOUT THE GAME

Both experts, however, also point out that sophisticated toys (or any toys) are not essential to developing life skills.

"I do not think that toys are essential to play," Janet says. "Some of the best and most valuable play experiences are generated without toys."

In fact, if the toys are too prescriptive, not age-appropriate or boring, they can also hamper development.

"This is absolutely true. Versatile, non-prescriptive toys are the best," Louise says.

"They stimulate imagination, problem-solving, creativity and development of motor skills."

Louise says a simple toy car can be used more creatively than a battery-operated train that is dependent on a specific track to operate.

"Two sticks and a pot could become a drum for one child, a wizard's

cauldron for another, while another may struggle to engage with these tools creatively," she explains.

Another interesting example, she adds, is Lego.

"A box of Lego could be considered an educational toy, as children learn how to build structures, vehicles – just about anything they want – creatively by piecing together different blocks through trial and error."

However, building a specific Lego set is more problematic, as the child is just following instructions and creating only one possible outcome.

But many feel that claiming a toy as "educational" is purely a marketing ploy aimed at pulling on the heart (and purse) strings of parents.

The argument here is that all toys have inherent educational value, and often it is play itself that is educational, not necessarily the toy with which the child is playing.

South Africa's first museum dedicated to play, Play Africa (at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg), explains that, "For young children, free, self-directed play is an integral part of early learning and healthy development – it sparks imagination, enhances creativity and problem-solving capacities, promotes teamwork and instills empathy and compassion for others."

This view is part of a global movement allowing children to learn by touching and playing with objects – any object in their environment.

Toys that children can hold and touch (not a touch screen) stimulate learning by encouraging children to experiment. These toys also give them the chance to play on their own, at their own pace and to use their creativity.

IT'S ALSO ABOUT PLAYING WITH YOU...

For many, it is not the physical toy that makes playing educational, it is also the time you spend with your child, playing.

"Almost any toy can become educational if you sit down with your kid and join in the fun," explains Nicola Yelland, a professor of early childhood studies in Australia.

"It is not the toy per se that boosts your child's brain, it is the quality of the

interaction the child has with the adult that does the trick."

Educational toys often claim that they will give your child "the edge". In fact, these toys are expensive and often limited in scope unless parents interact and teach their children the associated skills and concepts, Prof. Yelland says.

"Although I still think the actual toys are relevant, children do often need the teacher or caregiver to model or explain the function of a toy or even play with it before they get the best use out of it," Janet concurs.

The way to give your child "the edge", says Prof. Yelland, is to talk to them – and that doesn't cost any money.

And besides, she adds, it's fun.

"You don't need to interact with your child every time they play, but every now and then, start a pattern of talking to them about what they're playing with," she says. "It helps them learn by themselves."

THINK ABOUT WHAT EACH TOY TEACHES

With all toys having some inherent educational value, we then need to think carefully about what every toy is actually teaching.

"All toys are educational in that all toys teach something. We may not, however, be paying attention to what it is they are teaching," writes psychologist Christia Brown in an article for the US magazine *Psychology Today*.

Christia explains that when choosing a toy, you need to think about the values and skills you want your child to learn and decide if a particular toy allows for that.

For example: playing with a doll can teach essential nurturing and care-giving skills, while playing with a gun can teach that killing and aggression are fun and acceptable.

In the end, play is what children do – and your child will find something to play with.

So, as Sarah Baldwin, Waldorf teacher and toy seller, explains: "I've tried to stress to parents over the years that choosing toys is not about 'good toys' versus 'bad toys'. Rather, it's about bringing new consciousness to selecting children's playthings.

"Is it beautiful? Does it feel good? Does it leave room for the imagination? Will it inspire imitative play?"

"If you can answer yes to these questions, you'll be providing your child with all the tools needed for years of healthy play!" YB

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